

# Parallel Culture Traits in Ancient and Modern Greece

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The epic is a cultural phenomenon (if not a trait) represented in ancient, medieval, and modern Greek literature, both oral and written. The question naturally arises whether there is any continuity in this genre in Greece from one age to the next, from ancient to modern times. We can seek an answer on a number of levels, but for this brief paper I have limited myself to two: narrative pattern (or, the type of the hero), and the formula, the phraseology of the poetry.

For an example of narrative pattern, the return story of Odysseus has elements, such as deceptive story and gradual recognition, still found in the Akritic ballad of the Abduction of Digenis' Bride. As an example of the survival of a type of hero, the persistence of Heracles' attributes in the medieval Digenis and his modern counterparts is even more striking.

But let me take a cue from Professor Harry L. Levy<sup>1</sup> and relate my subject to two of the processes he describes in the field of epic, namely: (1) that the parallelism between ancient and modern Greek reflects also a cultural phenomenon shared by other peoples in the Balkan region, and (2) that the parallelism is the result of a continuous existence of epic from ancient to modern times in the Greek speaking area itself. As Professor Levy has indicated, this second process is difficult to deal with.

1. (Editors' note: Professor Levy's paper on 'Parallel Culture Traits in Ancient and Modern Greece' preceded Professor Lord's at the joint APA/MGSA session during the American Philological Association's annual meeting, Washington, D.C., December, 1975.)

Nevertheless, it is crucial, and I shall try to make a tentative suggestion about how we may investigate the possibility of continuity within change in two formulas in Greek story song from ancient to medieval and even modern times.

In the Balkans in general the term 'epos' means 'narrative' and is not restricted to what we call 'epic', i.e. long heroic poems in high style about figures of the past, but includes also what we call 'ballads'. All the peoples in the Balkans have still or had until recently the practice of singing oral traditional songs. Leaving aside the cases of Albanian and Roumanian, because of lack of space, I shall concentrate briefly on the Balkan or South Slavic (Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian) and Greek traditions.

These two traditions share a number of traits. (1) In both, for example, there are songs containing supernatural elements whose protagonists are historical figures of the past. Such are the Greek songs about Digenis Akritas and the South Slavic songs about Marko Kraljević. (2) In both traditions also there are songs dealing with local and more recent history. Two distinct types may be noted: (a) narrative oral history and (b) elegy. In the first category (a) are, for example, the songs of the First Serbian Uprising early in the nineteenth century and in Greek the song of Daskaloyannis of the late eighteenth century; in the second category (b) are the *hajduk* songs of the South Slavs and the klephtic ballads of Greece, particularly Crete.

This second group of songs (with its two categories) is linked to the Turkish rule, to the history of conflict between Greeks or Slavs and Turks, but I believe that the types themselves, i.e. local 'history' and elegy, are pre-Turkish, and that the latter especially, i.e. lament, derives from ancient Greek times<sup>2</sup> and from the kind of laments found in the *Iliad*. It seems doubtful that the Slavs inherited this practice, i.e. lamenting, from the Greeks. They probably brought it with them into the peninsula. It is, in all likelihood, Indo-European. Here then is a Greek cultural trait or custom we may consider to have been inherited in Greece from ancient to modern times, but it is one shared by Slavic neighbours, stemming probably from a shared cultural past.

One might adduce the famous reference in the *Odyssey* (*a*

<sup>2.</sup> Cf. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge, 1974).

345–52) when Telemachus rebukes his mother for stopping the bard from singing of the returns by saying that men like most to hear ‘the newest songs’ to demonstrate the existence in Homer’s day of songs of recent history, but if they existed, as well they may have, we do not have any other trace of them, so far as I know.

There are real problems connected with the first group I mentioned as shared by Greeks and Slavs, a group that is more clearly epic, and typified by songs of Digenis Akritas and Marko Kraljević. Both of these heroes have characteristics in common with Heracles and there is a real possibility that they have absorbed them from their ancient predecessor. I shall note here, for example, the characteristics of prodigious strength, a club, and an affinity for animals. Let me quote from my paper entitled, ‘Tradition and Innovation in Balkan Epic: From Heracles and Theseus to Digenis Akritas and Marko’, delivered at a conference in Bucharest in September 1974.

When Digenis was twelve, he fought wild beasts. First he attacked ferocious *bears*, a male and female with two cubs. His uncle told him not to use his sword, but only a club. Actually he squeezed the female to death and the male, which was running away, he flew after like an eagle and caught, seized by the chap, shook, killed, threw it on the ground, twisted its neck about and broke its spine. The incident with the bears was followed immediately by pursuit of a *deer* which was startled by the bears. Digenis overtook it in a few strides, seized it by the hind legs, and with a quick shake tore it in two parts. Shortly thereafter a *lion* came out of the thicket to find the boy dragging the bears with his right hand and the hind with his left. His uncle advised use of the sword for this encounter, and with it Digenis ‘split his head apart down to the shoulders’.

It seems clear, then, that from medieval to modern times there was much shared epic material in Slavic and Greek. The modern Akritic ballad of the Abduction of Digenis’ Bride is a close parallel to a well known South Slavic song of ‘Marko Kraljević and Mina of Kostur’. The book of the late Belgrade scholar Miodrag Ibrovac on Claude Fauriel’s Paris lectures on

modern Greek traditional song<sup>3</sup> has covered most if not all of the modern instances. There remains much to be done, however, in comparing Digenis Akritas and other figures of the medieval Greek epic with their South Slavic counterparts.

There are two main difficulties in linking the ancient Greek epic to that of medieval and modern Greece. The first is the length of modern Greek narrative songs; the second is the change from hexameter to the fifteen-syllable *politikos* verse.

No modern Greek songs compare in length and complexity with the Homeric poems. In this respect the comparison with their northern neighbours is puzzling. The Moslem oral traditional epics of Bosnia and South Serbia are of considerable length, some being of two to six thousand lines. This group of songs is differentiated from the South Slavic songs of Marko Kraljević in this respect also. In short, they are longer! Even more puzzling, however, is the fact that the closest parallels to the subjects of Homeric epic, most especially the *Odyssey*—I am thinking of the return story and of the initiatory Telemachus story—are to be found in the Bosnian and South Serbian tradition in Yugoslavia. It is not clear why this is so, why in modern times the longer epic on the traditional ancient Greek subjects of the *Odyssey* is not found any longer highly developed in Greece. Vestiges and echoes there are, as I have indicated, in such songs as the Abduction of Digenis' Bride, and in the Heraclean character of Digenis in the ballads. But the latter, at any rate, are survivals from the Byzantine period. In fact, for longer songs we must go back in time to that period and to the epic of *Digenis Akritas* itself. With it we have length and a basically classical hero in Christian romance guise.

I hasten to add that there was, of course, literary Greek epic of distinction in Renaissance and modern times in Greece to mention only *Erotokritos* and Kazantzakis' *Odyssey*. Yet the short historical songs and the klephitic ballads seem to have taken the place of the other traditional narrative songs in the modern Greek period. They fitted the mood and needs of the Greek people of the last few centuries in their struggles with the Turks. For oral traditional epic in Greece after Homeric, or ancient Greek, times one must look to Byzantium.

3. Miodrag Ibrovac, *Claude Fauriel et la fortune européenne des poésies populaires grecque et serbe* (Paris, 1966).

We now reach the problem of continuity or discontinuity from ancient to Byzantine epic. I have already spoken of the continuity of heroic type from Heracles to Digenis. Digenis' precocious childhood parallels that of Heracles and of other ancient heroes or gods; his dragon slaying can be matched in ancient Greek lore. Granted this kind of continuity, how does one deal with the change from ancient Greek hexameter to the medieval and modern *politikos* verse? Although stories can leap barriers of language and metre, continuity within a single language tradition in spite of internal language (i.e. linguistic) and metrical changes would be expected, provided one could show a continuity of form from hexameter to *politikos* verse. Could singers of hexameters over the centuries of change in the Greek language and the development of a new metre have continued to perform—could they even have helped in forming—the new metrical base? I would like to answer this in the affirmative, but I do not have as yet enough knowledge to do so. I would like to indicate, however, what I have been experimenting with. Suppose we examined phrase by phrase, formula by formula, those phrases or formulas which are alike (or perhaps have counterparts) in Homer, *Digenis*, and the Akritic ballads to see if we could watch a Homeric formula become an Akritic formula and survive in *politikos* to recent times. If we could note this in a sufficiently large number of cases we could possibly demonstrate how the singers might have accomplished the change. I can present here only two examples.

In spite of the changes from a combination of pitch and stress accent to stress accent alone and from the dactylic hexameter based on a pattern of long and short syllables to the fifteen-sixteen syllable metre of the *politikos*, one might expect some continuity of formula from ancient to medieval and modern narrative verse. One would expect, of course, that the formulas would change with the two changes just mentioned, but if the lexical unit was constant, such changes would be merely the adaptation of the central word of the formula to a new accentual and metrical environment. Examples of this can be found.

The simplest form of adjustment can be seen in the case of the vocative *τέκνον ἐμόν* in Homer. This phrase begins the line five times in the *Iliad* and seven times in the *Odyssey*. Middle Greek sometimes preferred the genitive of the pronoun (*ουν*) to the

possessive (*έμόν*), and the *politikos* verse is iambic. *Téknov έμόν* was changed to *τέκνον μου* to fit that syntax, and by adding *ω* at the beginning of the vocative phrase it was transformed easily into an iambic pattern (or perhaps *ω* was added to begin the verse with an iamb and *έμόν* was changed to *μου* to fit the syllabic count). In *Digenis*, therefore, one finds:

II.89:

Ὦ τέκνον μου γλυκύτατον, οἰκτείρησον μῆτέρα,

in which the epithet *γλυκύτατον* fills the remainder of the first half of the line. In III.132 the second half of the line, which begins like II. 89, consists of an appositive *φῶς τῶν έμῶν δημάτων*, thus extending the vocative to a whole line formula. In II. 120 one finds *τέκνον* replaced by *ἄνερ*: Ὁ ἄνερ μου γλυκύτατε, *αὐθέντα καὶ προστάτα*.

In Homer *τέκνον έμόν* can be used beginning in the second foot and extending to the middle of the third, before the main break within the line as in A 414:

ὦ μοι, τέκνον έμόν, τί νύ σ' ἔτρεφον αἰνὰ τεκοῦσα

and three more times in the *Iliad* and once in the *Odyssey* (λ 216):

Ὦ μοι, τέκνον έμόν, περὶ πάντων κάμμορε φωτῶν.

Examples in *Digenis* of *τέκνον μου* place it in the third and fourth feet (of eight), before the middle break in the line, occupying the second half of the third and all the fourth foot.

III. 139:

οἴα τελοῦνται, τέκνον μου, εἰς τὸ μνῆμα τοῦ Προφήτου

III. 153:

Πῶς τούτων πάντων, τέκνον μου, γέγονας παραβάτης

In III.160 *μῆτερ* is substituted for *τέκνον*.

τούτων πάντων, ὡς μῆτερ μου, καθέστηκα ἐν γνώσει,

but the position is the same, although the formula is extended by δ for metrical reasons to the beginning of the third foot. III. 220 shows the first pattern with μῆτερ substituted for τέκνον:

*Kai eīπερ βούλει, μῆτερ μου, ζωῆς ἀξιωθῆναι.*

In short, without going into further details and complexities both in Homer and in the medieval *Digenis Akritas* one could address one's child with the word τέκνον at either the beginning of the verse or just before the main internal break in the line. The tradition held over the centuries, despite changes in accentuation and metrical systems.

The case of τέκνον is a simple one. That of the various forms of ἀκούω, another word which maintained itself throughout the entire time span, is more complicated both because of the number of forms of differing length involved and also because of the several places where the accent may occur in ancient and in modern Greek.

The three-syllable forms in the Iliad tend to be in final position; the comparative frequency is 37–10. Twenty-four of those 37 instances have the accent on the penult (1 ἀκούειν, 1 ἀκούεις, 2 ἀκούσαι, 10 ἀκούσας, 3 ἀκούσῃ, 1 ἀκούσω, 1 ἀκούω, 5 ἀκούων). Judging only by the accent these forms could occupy either the final or the initial position in the *politikos* verse. Actually I have not yet found any cases of them in middle or modern Greek in final position. The only one of the above forms I have found, indeed, is ἀκούων and that three times in *Digenis* in initial position I. 113, 262; II. 170: Ἀκούων ταῦτα δ' ἀμηρᾶς . . .

A number of three-syllable forms of ἀκούω at the end of the hexameter are preceded by μῆθον. Since μῆθον was linked to the ἀκούω form only in final position, the formulas with it were lost: e.g. *Iliad*

Θ492:      ἐξίππων δάποβάντες ἐπὶ χθόνα, υῦθον ἀκουον  
Γ76, H 54:    “Ως ἔφαθ, “Εκτωρ δ' αὔτε χάρη μέγα μῆθον ἀκούσας  
B 16:          “Ως φάτο, βὴ δ' ἄρ' ὅνειρος, ἐπεὶ τὸν μῆθον ἀκουσε.

In at least one instance in *Digenis* we find a substitute for μῆθον in a formula with ηκουσα in the negative:

II. 121:

*ποτὲ λόγον οὐκ ἥκουσα μὴ οὐκ ἔνι εἰς ἀρεστόν μου.*

But the verb (and the whole formula) has been moved forward in the line.

The remaining three-syllable forms of *ἀκούω* in the Iliad (i.e. those not in final position [10] and those in final position with the accent on the first syllable [13]) all have the accent on the first syllable and could *not* be in either final or initial position in the *politikos* verse.

The poet of the Iliad places the three-syllable forms of *ἀκούω* with accent on the first syllable beginning at the end of the second foot and ending in the middle of the third. There is only one exception.

*H* 53: *ώς γὰρ ἐγὼν δπ̄ ἥκουσα θεῶν αἰειγενετάων*  
*Ω* 223: *νῦν δ' αὐτὸς γὰρ ἥκουσα θεοῦ καὶ ἐσέδρακον ἀντην*  
*Ω* 767: *αλλ' οὐ πω σεῦ ἥκουσα κακὸν ἔπος οὐδὲ ἀσύφηλον*  
*Σ* 35: *σμερδαλέον δ' φωτίζεν· ἥκουσε δὲ πότνια μῆτηρ*  
*Υ* 318: *Αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τό γ' ἥκουσε Ποσειδάων ἐνοσίχθων*  
*Υ* 380: *ταρβήσας, δτ̄ ἥκουσε θεοῦ δπα φωνήσαντος*  
*Φ* 377: *Αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τό γ' ἥκουσε θεὰ λευκάλενος Ἡρη*  
*P* 256: *"Ως ἔφατ', δξὺ δ ἥκουσεν" Οἰλῆος ταχὺς Αἴας*  
*Ψ* 161: *Αὐτὰρ επεὶ τό γ' ἥκουσεν ἀναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων*  
*I* 262: *εὶ δὲ σὺ μέν μεν ἥκουσον, ἐγὼ δέ κέ τοι καταλέξω.*

In short the preferred position is in the first half of the line just before the main internal break.

In *Digenis* the same position is preferred. Cf.

II. 121: *ποτὲ λόγον οὐκ ἥκουσα / μὴ οὐκ ἔνι εἰς ἀρεστόν μου*  
II. 204: *Καὶ ἡ κόρη, ως ἥκουσεν, / ἐννεδὲ ἐγεγόνει*  
III. 116: *'Η δὲ μῆτηρ, ως ἥκουσε / τοιαύτην ἀγγελίαν.*

The same position still holds for some four-syllable forms also in *Digenis*. Cf.

I. 82: *Οἱ δὲ ταῦτα ἀκούσαντες, / οτενάξαντες ἐκ βάθους*  
II. 13: *'Η δὲ ταῦτα ἀκούσασα / τῷ Θεῷ ηὐχαρίστει*  
II. 118: *'Η δὲ ταῦτα ἀκούσασα / ἐδήχθη τὴν καρδίαν.*

Interestingly enough the cases I have found in the Akritic ballads reverse verb and subject, but otherwise maintain the pattern of the *Digenis* formulas.

Thus from one of the ballads of Digenis and Charon we find:

line 25: ποὺ τ' ἀκουσεν διγενῆς ἀρκῶθη κι' ἐθυμώθη

from one of the songs of *Xαρζανῆς*.

line 91: ποὺ τ' ἀκουσεν διχανῆς κείνου ἀζούλεψέ του.

In these two instances, therefore, we have seen formulas around two words, *τέκνον* and forms of *ἀκούω*, maintaining themselves with appropriate adjustments from Homeric times to the present. For them there has been continuity in the poetic tradition, in spite of change in accent and metrical system.

Perhaps by following this technique, concentrating on the formula patterns around given words, we may be able to clarify what happened to the song tradition gradually over centuries of adaptation by the poets, as they moved from hexameter to fifteen-syllable verse.

In summary:

- (1) The Greeks share a kleptic type of song with the Southern Slavs. The Greek and South Slavic types are related on the one hand to historical songs of comparatively recent events and on the other hand to laments (*mirologoi*, *tužbalice*). The Greek lament tradition goes back at least to Homeric times, and the South Slavic lament tradition goes back to common Slavic times. The tradition is very likely Indo-European.
- (2) The songs of Digenis Akritas and those of Marko Kraljević are a type also shared by Greeks and South Slavs. Their heroes are Heraclean and some of their characteristics as well as some of their activities seem to go back to ancient times and to the figure of Heracles.

(3) I have demonstrated briefly a technique for studying the way in which traditional singers may have gradually modified formulas to adapt to accentual, lexical, and metrical changes.

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*Note:* I have used the Oxford texts of the Homeric poems and Kalonaros' text of Digenis materials.